

Year in Review

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Old school, Leavitt's visit among top stories

Jan. 2

Turner Mountain Ski Area enjoyed near record numbers on the day after Christmas, with skiers and snowboarders pouring into Libby from all over the map. More than 280 skiers and snowboarders were on the mountain.

Jan. 7

The big chill riding a polar express out of the north swept across western Montana over the weekend, plunging temperatures to 36 to 42 degrees below zero in areas of Lincoln County.

Monday morning found the Libby area experiencing near-record lows:

Jan. 9

Planning and potential funding sources for the former Stimson mill site were discussed during a brainstorming session on Tuesday that brought the county's port authority together with representatives of public and private

agencies promoting economic development around the state. The port authority officially took ownership of the 411-acre site on Dec. 30.

Jan. 14

A review of state highways in western Montana shows there are more needs than money for construction, which is why the Swamp Creek reconstruction of U.S. Highway 2 has been delayed until at least 2009, said a state official.

Jan. 16

For the second time in less than a year, city water plant employee Walt McElmurry has been appointed to fill a vacant seat on the Libby City Council. McElmurry was appointed last June but failed to retain his seat in the November election. He was one of three people who applied for the current opening, created when Gary Huntsberger vacated an appointed position on the council

after winning a seat in the election.

Jan. 21

The local ATV club is exploring the possibility of creating and maintaining a trail on Forest Service land connecting Libby and Troy. Libby District Ranger Malcolm Edwards said a major obstacle would be locating a track that avoids grizzly bear and other critical habitat, and other concerns.

Jan. 23

A second conference on asbestos-related disease will bring national experts in pulmonology, radiology, bioethics and clinical research to Libby on Jan. 26 and 27. The gathering will be a follow-up to a similar conference held last August.

Jan. 28

Workers removing asbestos-contaminated vermiculite from area homes and businesses are seeing a dramatic pay cut

following the adoption of a new wage schedule by the Environmental Protection Agency. People who had been paid hourly wages of \$24.29 to \$29.38 will now be paid \$14 to \$18 for every hour of work.

Jan. 30

The Lincoln County Port Authority is finalizing a deal to bring a second industrial tenant to the former Stimson mill property. MAL Resources, a Libby-based provider of building stone and landscape rock, plans to rent the 5,000-square-foot carrier barn near the maintenance shop for \$600 per month.

Feb. 4

The Libby Area Chamber of Commerce will no longer organize the annual Logger Days celebration in July. The decision by the chamber board of

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directors is part of an ongoing series of changes to make the Libby area organization healthier and more fiscally solvent.

Feb. 6

The cost of a proposal to extend sewer service to the Cabinet Heights area is being estimated at around \$2.5 million. An engineer briefed the Libby City Council on a feasibility study for the project, which looked at five different alternatives.

Feb. 11

Libby Superfund project manager Jim Christiansen is seeking help from the U.S. Department of Labor to determine a fair wage for Libby workers. Christiansen's announcement came on the heels of a workers' meeting that included representatives from the Operating Engineers union, who urged workers to get organized.

Feb. 13

The former Stimson offices along U.S. Highway 2 are getting a cleanup and fresh paint as the county port authority and the Kootenai River Development Council look for potential tenants. The office building covers 4,800 square feet on two floors and has four separate offices available on the ground floor and seven on the second floor.

Feb. 18

The EPA is recommending a minimum wage of \$19.55 an hour for Libby cleanup workers, but the final decision may rest with the U.S. Department of Labor. Project manager Jim Christiansen said the wages went down too much following a review.

Feb. 20

Gary Huntsberger will have six months to develop a plan for demolishing the old Libby High School building and for pulling together funding to carry out the project, the Libby School District board decided. Huntsberger went before the board two months ago to propose demolition if no other groups stepped forward with a plan for renovating the structure.

proposal from the Libby Youth Baseball-Softball organization at a meeting scheduled for Wednesday, March 17. Also at Wednesday's meeting, the LADC will consider proposed loan and grant guidelines and a proposed 2004-2005 budget for the Kootenai River Development Council.

March 19

The McGrade Elementary School building will be leased to a group of state agencies, the Libby School Board voted during a regular meeting on Tuesday night. Since closing the school last year because of declining enrollment and budget woes, the facility has been vacant.

March 24

A fire of undetermined origin destroyed the Secondhand Store at 102 Mineral Ave. on Friday morning. Firefighters were paged out at 8:15 a.m. and spent seven hours on the scene.

March 26

Logger Days, dropped this year by the Libby Area Chamber of Commerce, will continue with some changes under the sponsorship of the Kootenai Kiwanis Club. The event will be held June 25-26.

March 31

Negotiations are continuing between Centennial Healthcare - the corporation that owns the Libby Care Center - and the local employees union. Union representatives held a candlelight vigil to support employees.

April 2

A life-size gray wolf will be on permanent display at the Kootenai National Forest Supervisor's Office. A state road crew found the carcass of the animal on Montana Highway 56 near Bull Lake after the wolf was struck and killed by a vehicle.

April 7

The unionized deputies, detention officers and other employees of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Office have canceled plans to go on strike and have resumed negotiations with the county. Sheriff Daryl Anderson attributed the strike threat to "a big lack of communication."

Feb. 25

A federal magistrate recently ordered Asarco to pay a Montana environmental group for attorney's fees and costs incurred from a geophysical survey commissioned by the group at the mothballed Troy mine. The lawsuit filed by Cabinet Resource Group alleged that Asarco employees knowingly buried barrels of hazardous waste when the company owned the mine.

Feb. 27

The Montana Department of Transportation is planning to install a new signal light at the intersection of U.S. Highway 2, Mahoney Road and Sixth Street Extension this summer. The signal will replace the existing light at the intersection, which flashes yellow to traffic on the highway and red to traffic on the side streets.

March 3

Libby High School had waited 38 years for another boys basketball state championship, until the Loggers battled in Belgrade over the weekend and brought back the long-awaited trophy. Libby defeated Belgrade 96-89 in triple overtime to take the title.

March 5

Kootenai National Forest Supervisor Bob Castaneda is expecting this year's budget to be about \$1 million less than last year's \$26 million as the Forest Service continues to feel the impact of the costly fire seasons of recent years. That means fewer seasonal employees are likely to be hired and some local staffers may be given different duties.

March 10

Spurred to action by recent wage cuts, organizers are urging local asbestos cleanup workers to unionize. Representatives of the International Union of Operating Engineers and the Laborers International Union of North America met Thursday evening with about 15 workers who could form the core group to lead the formation of a local union.

March 12

Following the recommendations of a community advisory committee, the Troy School Board has decided to cut more than \$120,000 from the district's elementary and high school budgets rather than ask the voters to approve a levy increase. Last year, voters rejected a \$49,000 elementary school levy by a margin of 175 to 157.

March 17

The Libby Area Development Co. will review a \$30,000 grant

April 9

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Mike Leavitt has scheduled an on-site tour of Libby for May 26. U.S. Sen. Baucus put his support behind Leavitt's nomination to head the EPA last year after receiving a commitment that the former Utah governor would visit Libby personally.

April 14

A potpourri of concerns emerged from the Community Advisory Group meeting on Thursday night, most related to EPA director Mike Leavitt's proposed visit. Concerns ranged from budget cuts to the amount of time being allowed to brief Leavitt on the Libby Superfund site.

April 16

A school administrator and former banker from Alabama is the Troy School Board's choice for the district's next high school principal. The board selected Rodney Smith to replace David Henderson, who submitted a letter of resignation in February effective in June.

April 21

A manufacturer of wood-fired boilers and associated equipment is moving to the former Stimson mill site following a fire that destroyed the business's shop at Bonners Ferry. Owner Fred Seton is planning for a workforce of 17 to 22 people once production gears up.

April 26

Proposals for demolition of the old Libby High School building will be brought before the Libby School Board next month, Gary Huntsberger said at a regular school board meeting. Several months ago the board granted the former board member permission to pursue funding to accomplish the demolition after no other groups or organizations offered alternatives.

April 28

If Libby can come up with \$5.5 million, the community can build a world-class telecommunications network that will pay for itself within eight years, according to a 1,000-page study released last week. Representatives of Zero dB, the Spokane firm commissioned for the study, briefed the Libby City Council on their findings during a special meeting Friday evening.

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April 30

Gov. Judy Martz will arrive in Libby for a quick visit on asbestos health care issues and an appearance at the GOP's Lincoln/Reagan Day dinner on Friday night. Martz is slated to tour the Center for Asbestos Related Disease, the Montana Asbestos Screening and St. John's Lutheran Hospital before meeting with the Libby Health Care Study Group.

May 5

W.R. Grace has appealed the largest judgment in the history of the federal Superfund law, arguing that the Libby asbestos cleanup was not an emergency requiring a no-holds-barred response by the Environmental Protection Agency. Last August, a judge awarded the EPA more than \$54 million for costs incurred through the end of 2001 and issued a declaration holding Grace responsible for future cleanup costs.

May 7

The Swamp Creek section of U.S. Highway 2 will be getting some attention this summer aimed at holding the road together pending a reconstruction project tentatively scheduled for 2009. The

section between mile markers 45 and 57 will be getting a 2-inch overlay of asphalt with work scheduled to be completed by the end of June.

May 12

Plans to build a motocross course on the former Stimson mill property have been put on hold pending an analysis of the area by the Environmental Protection Agency for possible asbestos contamination. Construction of the course was stopped at the request of the EPA based on concerns that the project could lead to exposure to asbestos that may be present in the soil.

May 14

Community members interested in renovating the old Libby High School building are launching a grassroots campaign to preserve the historic structure. Vicki Munson of the Friends of Historic Libby High School organized a public meeting on Monday to discuss alternatives to demolishing the building.

May 19

EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt's scheduled visit to Libby on May 26 has been canceled. U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, who

secured Leavitt's promise to visit the Libby community, said the EPA director's visit will be rescheduled because of scheduling conflicts.

May 21

A local group interested in renovating the old Libby High School building will have until the end of next month to locate funds to stabilize the structure until further dollars can be secured, the Libby School Board decided. Vicki Munson of the Friends of Historic Libby High School presented the board with possibilities for renovating the school including potential sources of funding and future uses for the building.

May 26

Dr. Alan Whitehouse, a board-certified chest physician from Spokane, is taking a job with the Center for Asbestos Related Disease in Libby. Whitehouse has served as the CARD clinic's primary consultant.

May 28

The Libby City Council on Monday approved a request to provide fill material and water in the event of the demolition of the old high school building. The request came from council mem-

ber and former school board member Gary Huntsberger, who has been working on plans to have the building torn down.

June 2

When principal Connie Welter finishes her tenure at Libby Middle School at the end of June, she will bid adieu to what she calls the best six years of her career. Welter chose to retire with misgivings, forced to weigh familial priorities against leaving behind the staff and children she has grown to love.

June 4

The Libby Area Development Co. will formally hear proposals on construction of an outdoor event arena at J. Neils Park and expansion of the golf course at Cabinet View Country Club at a meeting scheduled for June 9. The arena group is seeking a \$245,000 grant, and the country club is proposing a \$1.5 million loan.

June 9

The Libby City Council voted to approve participation in an \$800,000 financing package for the buyers of Kootenai Paving. Based on a Small Business Administration loan program, the package includes \$400,000 from

First National Bank and \$320,000 from the city's economic development fund along with \$80,000 from the buyers, George and Sheryl Niemi.

June 11

The Libby City Council approved a \$100,000 grant to fund a second year for Libby Revitalization Inc. When LRI initially approached the Libby Area Development Co. and the city council for assistance last year, it sought \$300,000 for three years, but the proposal was modified to require separate requests for the second and third years.

June 16

Libby's old high school building is in good condition structurally with no major issues standing in the way of restoration, a group of Missoula architects and engineers who toured the building last week reported. The engineers inspected the building at the request of Friends of Historic Libby High School, a group seeking to preserve the 87-year-old structure.

June 18

A fleet of 30 Model T Ford cars will visit Libby on June 21 and June 22 during a 500-mile tour of northwest Montana. The group

will be running the Montana 500, a function of the Montana Cross Country Model T Association, which is affiliated with the Model T Ford Club of America.

June 23

Plans to expand and remodel the Lincoln County jail are moving ahead this week with a pre-bid tour for contractors. Bids for the project, pegged by preliminary estimates at around \$600,000, will be opened on June 30.

June 25

A local group interested in renovating the old Libby High School building has offered to purchase the building from the school district. Vicki Munson of the Friends of Historic Libby High School told the school board that a group of private investors had committed \$100,000 to purchase the building.

June 30

Businesses, organizers and people attending Loggers Days last weekend in Libby reported that they were pleased with the change to the downtown area. The Kootenai Kiwanis club adopted the annual event five months ago after it was dropped by the Libby Area Chamber of Commerce.